

Abhisit's dilemma

Caving in to protesters looks weak; dispersing them by force looks worse

EMERGENCY is becoming almost routine in Bangkok. On April 7th Abhisit Vejjajiva, the prime minister, put the Thai capital and some other parts of the country under a state of emergency for the fourth time in two years. This came after four weeks of street protest by anti-government "red shirts" demanding an early election. Both sides seem to have been trying to provoke the other into extreme action—a dangerous game of chicken that may well end in tears and perhaps even bloodshed.

The government had already invoked special powers under its Internal Security Act. The escalation to a full-blown state of emergency followed a shift in tactics by the protesters. On April 3rd they moved their encampment, a largely good-humoured carnival of songs, speeches and big red clappers, from the government quarter to one of Bangkok's main shopping districts. This caused some glitzy malls to close and vexed shoppers. Then they briefly stormed the election commission, and, in the final straw on April 7th, the compound around parliament. No one was hurt, but some MPs scurried for safety over the back wall. A few were rescued by helicopter.

The emergency decree bans gatherings of more than five people, and gives the government sweeping powers to detain protest leaders and to censor the press. One of its first uses was to block a television station that supports Thaksin Shinawatra, a self-exiled former prime minister, whom many red shirts support. Another was to set up checkpoints on roads around Bangkok, to stop people joining a big rally called for April 9th in defiance of emergency rule.

The protesters, many from the poor north-east of Thailand, regard Mr Abhisit's government as an illegitimate front for a commercial, aristocratic and military elite that has repeatedly refused to accept the electoral decision of the people. It took power in December 2008 by cobbling together a parliamentary majority. Protests by yellow-shirted "royalists" and court rulings had toppled an elected government loyal to Mr Thaksin.

Mr Abhisit has said he might dissolve parliament in December (a year before he has to), but not earlier. Now he faces criticism from some of his own middle-class supporters. His failure to keep the shopping malls open riles an elite contemptuous of the red shirts, whom they regard as an uneducated rabble paid by Mr Thaksin to stir up trouble. After the emergency decree, red shirts claimed that soldiers were massing in a skyscraper overlooking their demonstration, and at Bangkok's international airport.

The crowd of red shirts in the shopping district was reported to have fallen to 2,000-3,000, from perhaps ten times that number, and as many as 150,000 at the big rally on March 14th that launched the protests. But it still included whole families. Mr Abhisit, who came to international prominence as a courageous opposition spokesman after an army massacre of civilians in Bangkok in 1992, seemed loth to risk bloodshed. The army commander, General Anupong Paochinda, was also reported to oppose the use of force, prompting red shirts to speculate about rifts in military ranks. The government hoped that Songkran, the Thai new year holiday on April 13th, might draw protesters back to their homes. But it knows that will not end the cycle of confrontation that began when Mr Thaksin was toppled in a coup in 2006.

On April 8th Mr Abhisit cancelled a scheduled trip to Hanoi for a summit of the Association of South-East Asian Nations. It was preoccupied with the Myanmar junta's farcical plans for an election this year. At least it has plans, however.

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